

Tape #32

Interview with Peter Nichols

Date: 8/27/08

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Checked by

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01:35

CD: Thank-you very much. Um, Peter thank you for coming out today, thank you for your time. If could just start by you saying your name and spelling it . So the people doing the transcriptions don't spell it wrong.

01:51

8: Peter Nichols, P-E-T-E-R N-I-C-H-O-L-S

CD: Very good.

02:08

CD: So Peter if we could just start by you introducing yourself and telling us where you were originally from.

02:13

PN: I'm Peter Nichols. I was born in Detroit Michigan. The United States of America

02:26

CD: What made you want to enlist in the Navy?

02:30

PN: Well, primarily I was born, I was raised on a small farm and uh, if you're on a farm circuit, generally a small farm is not conducive to doing very much in this world except supporting you and your family. So I started high school, and I think I was eleventh grade when I decided uh there was nothing there so I pursued uh the navy career and uh I joined the United States Navy from the little town that I was raised in primarily and they sent me to uh the Great Lakes Naval Training Station for thirteen weeks for training

03:35

CD: There was a jet that took off while you were talking about the small farm.
<<interruption>>

03:50

PN: Well the small farms in the Depression era, was long before your time, if you didn't plant it and raise it, the chances are that you did not live as well as you could have , because most of the time in small farms you raise your produce and

your livestock and uh your poultry and whatever goes with the livelihood to make your life's survival, and this went on for quite, year after year the same thing. So I decided that I wasn't getting anywhere, as I look back now, and uh, well there was adventure, a chance to get ahead, to learn something, and as it was I learned a trade, so to speak and I uh progressed from there.

04:51

CD: Tell us the story of your enlistment. When you did it and how old you were.

04:57

PN: Uh, October the twenty-sixth, nineteen-thirty-seven, is when I enlisted in the United States navy, and I was sent to the Great Lakes naval training station in Illinois. Which was a new experience for a seventeen year old young man and uh I was not that experience as I think most seventeen year olds aren't but it was uh a very good experience as far as finding a new experience is with a lot of other young men going to the same way I was. And uh, having all the different shots that are necessary when you join the military because you don't know where you're going so you have various shots that prevent different diseases from entering your system. And there's always vivid in my mind uh in those days we had hammocks stretched across, what's only three or four feet off the floor, and at night you could hear the young men dropping off the floor because uh the shots were uh kind of painful and at the same time the new experience of lying in a hammock and trying to turn over. Well, you don't turn over very well in a hammock, you wind up on the floor. So that was, I'll always remember that.

06:41

CD: What was your rank and job when you were sent out to Pearl Harbor?

PN: Are you talking about December the seventh?

CD: just prior to, leading up to it. What did you do what was your rank?

07:05

PN: After thirteen weeks, in Naval Training Station, I was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, Battleship BB-37 and that was all the way across country. It was at that time, it was berth in uh Long Beach and if you're familiar with Long Beach there's a breakwater out there and several of the ships were lined up, um, on the inside of the breakwater. And the, being a greenhorn so to speak I was, I was assigned to the deck force. Which most all the young men were assigned . Fifth division deck force and that entailed uh keeping the brass polished and scrubbing the teak wood floors and doing uh kitchen detail, in other words somebody has to set up the tables for the rest of the people to, to eat, prepare the food, to clean up and this uh is one of the break-in of all the young men uh I think was a three month detail for just about everyone that was in there. **(08:23)** And for I believe, my dates are not accurate. I believe I was there about approximately two years. Then I was transferred to the aviation unit. They had uh the Oklahoma had two airplanes. Two bi-planes. They called them S-O-C's, socks. And we had two catapults and the, I made third class aviation machinist

mate at that time. And the, while this is going on there was a new air station being put together on Hawaii, and it's called Kaneohe Naval Air Station. I was transferred there, I believe uh around March eleventh nineteen forty-one. Which was my birthday for some reason or another. And the, I was assigned to the ship's, ship's company you might say. And the, a lot of the jobs being there at that time, being a new station, was putting, was getting everything ready for habitation you might say. So the rest of the crew that'd be coming in, so you'd put, you'd get uh, um, the barracks ready, the fire department, and uh anything that had to be done were there was a crew of people there was working to put that together. And that led up to the time December the seventh at zero-seven-fifty-five A-M

10:11

CD: So if we could just back up a little bit. What was life like aboard the Oklahoma?

10:16

PN: Oh, the Oklahoma was a big battleship and I'm partial to big ships, battleships and aircraft carriers. And the, I always enjoyed, enjoyed the Oklahoma being a big battleship your always on the open because being on the deck force you're always up on the topside. If you're a machinist, or things of that nature, then your down below decks, doing the, the necessary work to the machinery. And uh, oh I don't know, we, one thing about the service, you're always training for the, the inevitable. Just about everyday, there's some kind of training sessions going on. Battle stations, to get yourself, to get everyone familiarized where they're supposed to be, where they're supposed to go, how to handle the equipment, um, I think we were assigned, we were the crew there, assigned to the five and fifty-one, uh, batteries. Battery on the port side and on the starboard side, five-inch guns. We each had our assignment there, and we practiced firing on targets. At that time we'd go out, and there be a big, uh, tug and they'd be towing a great big target. And it'd be out quite a distance and then they'd start shooting at it with the big fourteen-inch guns. And uh, uh, the big fourteen inch guns you're on off to the side because that's a pretty good loud noise. And when they shoot those, uh, monsters you might call them you could see like three birds flying through the air you could see the bullets. The shell are about this high, they're about that big around, twelve, fifteen-hundred pounds, something like that. You could see three of them shooting up over the, towards the target. And we did uh get E for efficiency. Battleship E and you put that on a smokestack up there, a big E, and subsequently you have, you get what they call hash marks every time you get another uh, let's see uh promotion you might call it. With efficiency for firing the five inch guns. As I say there was always a training session, constantly, and more so when you're on, on uh ship going out to sea. Going to various areas. That being in battle formation or whatever with uh carriers, and destroyers and the cruisers. (13:32) Light and heavy cruisers. And you'd simulate, simulate different operations.

13:39

CD: What was life like on Hawaii prior to December seventh?

<<Hallway interruption>>

14:36

CD: What was life like on Hawaii prior to December seventh?

14:37

PN: Oh that was when Hawaii was truly Hawaii. Nineteen thirty-seven, thirty-eight. There were no hotels other than the Royal Hawaiian, if you've ever been there. At the Royal Hawaiian it's always been painted pink, and uh the MO-AH-NO was the two primary hotels that were there, s a matter of fact they are still there. And uh as you travel from there out to the other areas most everywhere around there were pineapple fields. So if you went, came from uh, downtown Honolulu over to the Pearl Harbor area there, those areas were all covered with pineapples. For a good many years. And then once the war started and everything blossomed, if you've been there now you'll notice the practically it's uh suburbia from there to uh Pearl Harbor. Just like it is in this country. But it uh just exploded with uh buildings, restaurants, high rise hotels, you name it and it's it's still going on.

15:54

CD: What was your shore leave like in Hawaii in the early days?

15:58

PN: Well I'll tell you part of it. We had uh, the transportation was local buses . So if I, you walked any distance you could do that but uh if you wanted to go to Pearl Harbor you rode the bus. You could drive, walk up Diamond-head it's a little ways up there, but being young you're in pretty good shape you can walk. A lot of time spent on the beach in Waikiki. The only thing about the Waikiki beaches there was a lot of coral down there. It's not a sandy bottom like envision some of our beaches here. Sandy bottom for a little ways, but a lot of that sand is imported at that time, but coral, coral was the rest of it all through there. Now if you go there the hotels are right smack on the beach the whole way. I can remember right after the war started there were large homes right on the beach there and uh some family, I can't remember exactly, but there was a family there that invited the sailors from the Oklahoma, so many of them to come over there at their home and we had a luau, but that's long gone now. But uh, you'd have a luau and there was very , very enjoyable. Uh, being young and free at that time as too many of us still are doing you go to the bars that are frequently around there for the, mostly for the tourists and the military. So you'd go in there and have a beer or what have you and do a lot of walking around and talking and swimming and that's about all there was to do at that time. **(18:11)**

18:12

CD: What was your job at Kaneohe?

18:18

PN: Well, remember I'm just a third class aviation machinist mate, well there's

not to much responsibility at that grade, though we were busy, we, we had other crew members there, putting things together and trying to get oriented with what's going on at a new airstation. All the barracks being there, putting together the different components that's necessary to make a station viable. There was the boat house, there was a fire department, things that you had, and most of the time, if I remember, we were working at putting the barracks together. That necessitated putting lockers and bunks and all these things, putting them in the big room that there were there for the crew to be assigned at that area.

19:34

I Do you remember what your day was like on December 6th?

PN No. Not really, but it probably was going to the shop as we normally did. We had shops there being set up for engine repair. Later on we had a shop put up for making repair propellers, but at that time it was engine repairs that were being put together. I'm kind of vague, after all, 65 years kinda slips by and you don't get to remember all these little details. But I do remember we spent a lot of time at the shops, I spent a lot of time studying in the evening. You had a little desk, and we had a light, and I was studying for, from 3rd class to 2nd class, 2nd class to 1st class, and 1st class to chief, and that took a span of 3 years. So, if you have the desire to advance, you need to crack open those books, just like you do when you're going to college, and start studying the best you can so when you take your exams, you have a good chance to pass. And that's what some of the time was spent.

21:23

I Were you aware of any rising tensions between Japan and the United States?

PN Not really. We did have classes, if I recall, on how these silhouettes on the wall, in classes, of the different kind of aircraft and battleships, cruisers and so forth, the Japanese had so we could recognize them when we were out at sea. So there was an ongoing type of learning, you might say, going on all the time. But I don't recall any type of animosity at that time, but I think that there were knowing, oh disruptions, I'm trying to find out the word I want to say, problems between nations. It didn't take long right after December the 7th to find out what was really going on, but at that time, we weren't really interested in so much of the outside world as we are, we I'm saying, plural, we were what's going on in the Navy atmosphere. After all, we were recruits, and we were trying to learn the ropes of what the Navy has to offer. More interesting that what the outside world was going on at that time.

23:08

I Could we...could you describe the day of December 7th, what you saw, what you did, what you heard?

PN Well, December the 7th, we got up early, which was Sunday, and had breakfast, and walking back from breakfast, the usual round would be

walking back to the shops, cause you either go to the barracks or you go to the shops. So we went, I went walking toward the shop, I think it was about 5 minutes to 8, and all of a sudden I heard a low flying aircraft. That's what it seemed to be, a low flying aircraft. And for some reason or another, I immediately recognized the aircraft as being Japanese because of the insignia on the side, they were so low, they call them the meatball, you know, there was a great big round sun, as you might say, a ball, orange type ball, red type ball, however you want to describe it. So I immediately recognized the silhouette of the Japanese aircraft and, flying that low, why they were doing that, I wasn't aware that we were at war already, but that's where it started. And, soon as I saw that, I ran over to the armory and was issued a 30-ought-6 rifle and ammunition, and that's the 30-ought-6 vintage of WWI, a bolt action, and ammunition, and started going out to the shop area and shooting at whatever we could get, I could get, I'm going back to we again, whatever I could see, as far as aircraft were concerned, because they were more or less flying to shoot up all the aircraft that were at Keneohe Naval Air Station, which were primarily patrol bombers, PBY's. Some of them were amphibious, they could land on water or they could land on the tarmac. **(25:40)** The bombers came in a bombed the hangars, and they were shooting up all the airplanes over there, there were, they could shoot up. As far as I know, the administration part of the facility was untouched. Everything was concentrated over there by where the aircraft were.

Pause

26:56

I Could you describe the damage that Keneohe suffered that day?

PN Well, from what I know, the hangars were destroyed. I, for a long time I thought all the aircraft were destroyed, but if you know John Finn, he was stationed in the VP squadron, I was stationed in the airstation crew, he was stationed in the VP squadron, and I talked to him not too long ago when we had our convention in San Diego here not too long ago, he was there, and I was telling him about all the aircraft, and he said, 'no they were not all destroyed.' So I had to change my thinking. I didn't realize that there were a few, how few I do not know. But most all the airplanes were shot up and burned. The hangars were, as I say, destroyed. As far as I know, there were 19 sailors, and there may have been one civilian, killed, but the total number, as far as I know, is 19.

28:19

I Did you have any close calls that day?

PN Not that I recall, not that I recall. They were concentrating, I was out on the street, cause they had streets out there anyway, and the shops were over here, and the hangars were over here, and the airport was up in this direction. So everything was concentrated in that area, in those 2 areas. So I was this side of it, and the people that got, that were destroyed, you might say, killed, the sailors, and I think there was one civilian, were right

in the hangars and right by the airplanes. Now Finn was over there, and he pulled a machine gun off, and he was shooting at that area. So we were on this side of it, a little ways from the direct fire that they encountered.

28:18

I How were the airplanes oriented on the field that day?

PN Well, most all of them, I'm thinking Little Liberty's here, most all the airplanes in all the airports, I'll call them that, the various military fields, were all lined up into rows, military style, you might say. And I would assume these were the same way, other than the fact the ones that were anchored out in the bay that were anchored out there wherever the anchors were, and I don't know how many PBY's were anchored out there. But, as you see pictures of the various activity there was at that time, it looks like all the airplanes were in a row and all they had to do was just come on down with the machine gun blazing, and that was about it.

END OF TAPE